

# ARCADIA

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## **Foreign language learning in Second Life and the implications for resource provision in academic libraries**



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**arcadia@cambridge: rethinking the role of the research library in a digital age**  
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# **Executive summary**

## **Background**

This report was produced as a research exercise for the Arcadia Fellowship Programme at Cambridge University Library over a period of nine weeks. It aimed to investigate foreign language learning in Second Life, the 3D virtual world, and the implications for resource provision in academic libraries.

The research was carried out by interviewing sixteen volunteers. The group of volunteers comprised of foreign language teachers, teacher trainers and a student, all of them active in Western Europe.

## **Key findings**

Choosing teaching resources:

Choosing teaching resources for courses in real life and in Second Life followed similar principles in that the students were seen as the main resource. This means that students often dictate the content of at least part of the course due to their own interests and experiences.

Publishers:

There is not much published material for computer based learning environments and teachers are eager to have this gap filled.

Distance learners:

Teaching/learning in Second Life has great potential for distance learning students in particular and libraries will need to provide remote access to a very wide range of electronic resources within Second Life.

Library resources:

Many more library resources are being used for real life courses than for Second Life courses. In Second Life teachers tend to exploit the virtual world itself rather than using library material, with the exception of electronic resources.

Language labs:

Academic libraries and language labs should be two closely cooperating entities, possibly even under the same roof, to make it easier for students to follow up links.

Second Life as an additional tool:

Foreign language learning in Second Life is not seen as a threat to the traditional classroom. It is regarded as an additional tool in the teacher's toolbox.

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## Introduction

This project focuses on foreign language learning in Second Life and the implications for resource provision in academic libraries. In this context Second Life does not refer to the later years in life but to an online virtual world frequented by thousands of people simultaneously. Hislope (2008, p.56) sees it as “an excellent potential resource for supplementing foreign language classes” and this project aims to establish whether academic libraries have a role to play in this.

## Second Life

Second Life (SL) is a free online synchronous 3D virtual world (an environment also known as a Multi-User Virtual Environment, or MUVE) that has been in existence since 2003. It was launched by a San Francisco based company called Linden Lab which states as its mission “[...] to connect us all to an online world that advances the human condition” (Linden Lab, 2009). Linden Lab has created a platform, a shell, which has been filled with the objects, adventures and experiences of the people using SL. People enter SL for various reasons: to meet other people, to work, to educate and be educated and to have fun along the way.

The first step into SL is to create an avatar which is a digital representation of oneself. This representation can be as truthful or as fictional as one would like it to be. Here people morph into fantasy figures, animals, or they simply just lose weight in a matter

of seconds. Appearances can be changed all the time.<sup>1</sup> Once an avatar has been created one is officially a resident of SL and in order to enter this virtual world one has to download the viewer from the SL website [www.secondlife.com](http://www.secondlife.com) (31MB for Windows and 65MB for Mac).

Anything is possible in SL apart from dying: people buy or rent property, buy furniture, go to work, go to university, go dancing, get married and even have children.

SL has its own currency (Linden \$, with an exchange rate of 1 US\$=approx. 260 L\$) and its own time zone (the equivalent to Pacific Standard Time). Communication media include text chat, instant messaging, voice chat and notecards. All chat can be logged for future reference. Instant messages can be delivered to an email address if the respective resident is not online at the time of sending the message. Voice chat was introduced in August 2007 and although the educational community had discovered SL prior to this date, it was from August 2007 onwards that more classes and educational projects took shape within SL. This was particularly true for foreign language learning classes where voice is very instrumental.

Today SL boasts many virtual classrooms, language schools and teaching and learning opportunities at almost every corner. It is almost impossible to quantify this further as teachers often do not confine themselves to one particular space in SL. They tend to include as much as SL has to offer as part of their classrooms. Foreign language learning is a strong feature within SL due to its interactive and immersive nature. The 3D effect intensifies communication and contributes to social interaction. This can very much be seen as an addition to conventional learning environments and opens up opportunities to convey teaching material in a new and exciting manner. Some people would argue that SL is a game, and while it certainly has a game-like character, typical features of a game are missing, such as game rules, scoring points or being competitive.

The potential of SL in education has yet to be fully explored and exploited. The way people work and learn has changed radically over the past decade or so. New technologies have created a global virtual communication network and with this comes the expectation for people to adapt rapidly to new technology and to acquire new skills.

## **Literature review: foreign language learning in Second Life**

The literature review focuses on general concepts in foreign language learning, such as immersion, criticism of traditional teaching methods, use of chat, as well as on an annotated list of current SL projects which is by no means exhaustive.

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<sup>1</sup> It is perfectly acceptable to conduct a work meeting at the Second Life Island of the Open University with a large chicken.

This study does not restrict itself to English language learning. Its objective was to investigate foreign language learning in general in SL. However, English language teaching/learning featured more heavily in the sample selected. English is an important part of globalization as it enhances international communication. It has become increasingly necessary for non-English speakers to be able to communicate in the English language which in turn means that classes of English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) are flourishing. However, according to Reyes and Vallone (2008, p.vii) there is a shortage of qualified teachers when it comes to English language learning.

In the English language learning context the concept of submersion versus immersion is being discussed. Reyes and Vallone (2008, p.21) define submersion as a concept where no support is provided by the teacher whereas immersion is defined as a concept where plenty of educational support including context and hands-on learning opportunities are provided and they see submersion as “linguistically insensitive and culturally non-responsive”. Immersion is characterized by the fact that instructions are context-embedded and therefore the approach treats the second language learner as if he/she was learning his/her first language - which incidentally would correspond to the playful type of language learning present in SL.

For a better understanding of foreign language learning in SL it is helpful to understand the criticism of foreign language learning in a traditional, real life classroom. Ho (2006, p.7) sees this criticism fuelled by the “general perception [...] that students remain orally incompetent despite being structurally knowledgeable in the second language.”<sup>2</sup> He goes on to express “a desire for teaching environments where a lot more attention is paid to active and engaging teacher-student and student-student interactive behaviour”. In a recent JISC study De Freitas (2008, p.6) mentioned that the “[...] inversion of the norms of education does of course at its heart offer a direct challenge to our understanding of how we learn” meaning that practical engagements, social interaction and role plays can take the place of pure knowledge acquisition. It is a challenge that will not be taken up by everyone as it requires a certain degree of flexibility and openness paired with the willingness to forego a certain extent of control.

The main communication in SL happens via voice chat, text chat and instant messaging. Mishan (2007) has written an interesting essay on online chat. Online chat is not necessarily a component of a foreign language class but it could be if so required. It has a role in foreign language learning as it develops conversation and gives an insight into how to use a language in an informal manner. It is important to bear in mind that “each new communications technology spawns its own language variety and interactive patterns”. Abbreviations and “accepted misspellings” (phonetic spelling or homophones, i.e. thx) appear, punctuation mainly serves a phonological purpose as well as capitalisation (though this is different in the German language), and the language takes on a spoken rather than written character. This is reflected in simple syntax. Brevity is the main driver behind this, and some of the above lexical features will be slightly confusing for a beginner in a foreign language or at least for someone who is not familiar with informal language. It is a creative way of

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<sup>2</sup> It is the researcher’s own experience that 9 years of learning English as a second language in a traditional classroom setting is a very good grounding with a big passive vocabulary but there is a lack of skill when it comes to deep and meaningful communication/conversation.

expression and therefore demands a creative cognitive process to decipher the meaning. There are also sociolinguistic features to consider. Electronic anonymity reduces the significance of factors such as age, gender or social hierarchy. It is a level playing field, an egalitarian space, which is only supported by keyboarding skills and personality. The Goethe-Institut offers voice chat courses with experienced tutors for the German language.<sup>3</sup>

Currently there are three EU-funded projects that deal with foreign language learning in SL, namely the AVALON project (Access to Virtual and Access Learning live ONLINE)<sup>4</sup>, the NIFLAR project (Networked Interaction in Foreign Language Acquisition and Research)<sup>5</sup>, and the “Talk with Me” project.<sup>6</sup> The Kamimo project<sup>7</sup>, which looked at teaching and learning in SL and which was funded by the Norwegian Open University, gave teachers a place -- Kamimo Island -- to experiment with teaching in SL. A lot of the experimentation that took place on Kamimo Island has fed into the project proposal for the AVALON project. The Kamimo project came to an end in 2008 and concluded that SL has enormous educational potential due to its immersive nature and social networking facilities.

Other projects include ASimil8<sup>8</sup> which is based at University College Dublin; Avatar Languages<sup>9</sup> using a combination of Second Life, Skype, GoogleDocs and an online whiteboard; the Electronic Village Online<sup>10</sup>, a professional development project and virtual extension of the TESOL Convention; Teach You Teach Me<sup>11</sup> which is also called a buddy network in that people are finding conversation partners in Second Life to teach their own language and learn the other person’s language at the same time. There is also EduNation, which is a creation of Consultants-E<sup>12</sup> and provides training in SL with an emphasis on language teaching and learning. The most established virtual world language school is LanguageLab<sup>13</sup> which has built an English city in SL exclusively for its students. Here students can learn English by total immersion in real-life scenarios, for example visiting a doctor or a lawyer etc. The British Council is very active in the Teen Grid version of SL with its Learn English Second Life for Teens with over 1000 students from 12 different countries. Talkademy<sup>14</sup> is another example of a language school using the SL environment for its classes. A SL island called Virtlantis provides around thirty launch rooms which are small spaces for language teachers to be used as classrooms.

In addition to these projects it is worth noting that “a figure of roughly three quarters of UK universities are estimated to be actively developing or using Second Life at the institutional, departmental and/or individual academic level”. (Kirriemuir, 2008, p.58).

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.goethe.de/Z/jetzt/dejchat/dejsecon.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <http://avalon-project.ning.com/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://cms.let.uu.nl/niflar/>

<sup>6</sup> This project was mentioned by one interviewee, but no more details available at date of research.

<sup>7</sup> [http://esmsgsl.com/kamimo\\_project\\_report.html](http://esmsgsl.com/kamimo_project_report.html)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.asimil8.com/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.avatarlanguages.com/home.php?lang=en>

<sup>10</sup> <http://evosessions.pbworks.com/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://teachyouteachme.ning.com/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.theconsultants-e.com/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.languagelab.com>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.talkademy.org>

# Methodology

Qualitative interviewing was chosen as the preferred method of research. The timeframe of the project allowed for sixteen people to be interviewed over the course of four weeks. The sample consisted of fifteen foreign language teachers/teacher trainers and one foreign language student, thirteen of whom were actively involved in teaching/training/learning in SL. The social networking site of the AVALON project was particularly useful for initiating contacts to professionals in the area of foreign language learning in SL. Interviews were conducted either face-to-face, on Skype or in SL, depending on the interviewees' preference, and lasted between half an hour to almost one and a half hours each.

For the purpose of this study no restrictions were laid on the type of language taught/learned in order to include a variety of languages. In practice though the majority of people interviewed were English language teachers, in particular TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers.

The interview questions were split into five different sections (see Appendix):

- 1) questions about the interviewee
- 2) questions about the type of course
- 3) questions about teaching/learning in the traditional style<sup>15</sup>
- 4) questions about teaching/learning in SL
- 5) questions about the role of the library

The first two sections could be answered by all of the interview volunteers. The appropriateness of the next three sections depended on the circumstances of the interviewee. For example, if somebody is exclusively teaching in SL then it does not make sense to ask them questions about teaching in the traditional style and vice versa. Some people had no connection to a library and therefore had great difficulty in expressing views about the role of the library. Naturally the researcher had to make spontaneous decisions as to which questions were suitable for the respective interviewee.

# Findings

The research centres around the following main themes:

- Teaching resources
- Hurdles/barriers
- Advantages/disadvantages of chosen teaching method
- Library resources

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<sup>15</sup> The traditional style is defined as a typical teacher-centred classroom with the teacher at one end and the students at the other end. In the context of this study it does include lab work and other online environments which are not taking place in SL.



- Role of the library
- Impact on resource provision

## Teaching resources

The principle for choosing teaching resources in SL are the same as in real life, i.e. the students are seen as the main resource. Their interest and their language needs become the course content. Obviously this has to align with the EU and their Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)<sup>16</sup> so that the students are able to reach the required level of proficiency. Doctoral students for example need to present their research and consequently they need to learn how to interact with their peers in conference-type situations. For beginners it is very different as it can be argued that the lower the level of student the less one can rely on the *lingua franca* and the more resources one is going to need. There is often total freedom in how this can be achieved though and students have their own resources outside of the classroom. These resources can be a textbook of their choice, the internet, newspapers, etc.

Generally teachers tend to use a range of different resources, ranging from course books to notecards, videos, DVDs, CDs, radio programmes, television programmes (incl. documentaries), YouTube clips, objects (made by both the teachers and the students), newspapers, podcasts, online material, multimedia language learning software.

## Publishers' materials

Most teachers who participated in the interviews would not limit themselves to only use what is provided by the publishers. Usually many other resources are being exploited as well. An interesting comment was made about the publishers' ability to produce suitable material for online classes. One interviewee expressed the opinion that a lot of what the publishers have provided so far is in fact a replica of what they would have produced on paper in a book form. It can be printed and used very easily, but if the students would try to use it in the computer based learning environment the material would not work because the dynamic of the computer classroom is very different from the dynamic of a traditional classroom. Another interviewee said that he has become an author and is in fact writing teaching material for computer based learning environments himself as the market is not providing this for him.

## Type of classroom

Group work (enquiry based learning) is featuring quite heavily both in SL as well as in real life. Opinions are divided on whether to replicate face-to-face classes in SL or whether to try different scenarios. Amongst educators in SL the traditional classroom setting is seen as somewhat controversial. The most common replica of a face-to-face class would be a teacher's desk at the front with a whiteboard behind and with a set of seats at the other side of the room. This is not a very exciting and inspiring setting, and it is even less so when considering the rich environment that SL has to offer. Teaching in SL often involves quests, treasure hunts, and role play. Students seem very happy to use a specific teaching ground as both a starting point and an end point to the lesson, but in between they like to travel to different places and explore and learn while they enjoy their experiences.

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<sup>16</sup> [http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Source/Framework\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf)

One interviewee who is almost exclusively working with net-based courses mentioned that as most students live at a distance there is only a small amount of face-to-face teaching on a voluntary basis, backed up with desktop videoconferencing (Adobe Connect)<sup>17</sup>, backed up by podcasts, backed up by printed study guides.

## **Hurdles/barriers**

This section is divided into two parts: hurdles/barriers in real life, and hurdles/barriers in SL.

### **In real life**

There are very real political and bureaucratic barriers to change. The implementation of change can be a very long process depending on the flexibility of the institution involved. Real life barriers can be dependent on where the teaching is taking place and what level is being taught. This implies that teaching adults is easier than teaching children and it also implies that today's society is so culturally diverse that it is increasingly easier to be able to practice a foreign language in one's own surroundings, i.e. being able to order a meal in a Spanish tapas bar.

Especially in their first year students might not feel confident enough to be as responsive as they can be in their lessons. Their willingness to expose themselves, to expose their weaknesses inside the class, takes time and will develop as and when a sense of community inside the class has been created.

### **In SL**

#### **Technological barrier**

The main barrier in SL is technological. There can be system failures and problems with speed and some students won't have the required hardware. It is problematic in terms of validating the courses because your institution will have to validate that the teaching in SL is as good as the teaching face-to-face. This is an illustration of a general principle that whenever you move away from traditional forms of teaching you come across bureaucratic obstacles. The phenomenon of 'griefing' (i.e. online harassment) taking place in SL has also been described as a barrier. Pornographic material in SL can be another barrier. People who have never used SL before can expect a very steep learning curve to enable them to manoeuvre inside the virtual world and reach a suitable level of familiarity with the interface.

#### **Need for extra support**

First time visitors to SL can be very disoriented and unless they receive a lot of support it can be somewhat stressful for them. It is always easier to start the SL experience with a clear aim in mind. Once people have met somebody and once they know they can contact somebody via email, blog, Facebook or even via the phone, they feel much better and assured. In that respect it is similar to Fresher's week at university.

#### **Attitudes about meaningful learning environments**

Often students' beliefs about what is a good and meaningful learning environment can affect the way they are able to tolerate the learning environment they find

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobatconnectpro/>, Adobe® Acrobat® Connect™ Pro is web conferencing software.

themselves in. That is a particular difficulty with SL, because students don't know what to expect and they bring with them their own beliefs and experiences and they struggle to transfer what they think is a good learning environment into this context. A similar effect applies to teachers also. The teachers' own beliefs about teaching and learning informed their response to different approaches to teaching. Teachers who teach in both real life and SL sometimes compare the two and notice a lot of things lacking. However, if SL can be seen as a new tool that one can use if one wants and when it fits the situation then there is not much lacking. Attitudes are always important to any hurdle/barrier.

### **Body language**

Body language is very limited in SL, but SL requires one to use language in a very precise way and to use more language to compensate for the lack of body language. One interviewee expressed the view that teaching a language might be one of the most suitable subjects in SL because technical issues, such as the inability to hear voice chat or lag, can all be used to generate language use and therefore become a lesson in itself.

## **Advantages/disadvantages of chosen teaching method**

One interviewee expressed the view that real life and SL are not opposite things. SL is not here to replace real life but it should be seen as an extra tool that the teacher can use. The following section attempts to explain the advantages and disadvantages of teaching in both worlds.

### **Advantages of teaching traditionally in real life**

It is possible to receive immediate feedback from the students and one can pick up on issues visually and psychologically. In that context some interviewees have expressed the view that there is no substitute for face-to-face teaching. The social interaction is seen as extremely valuable. There is also a pastoral element to teaching face-to-face and being aware of the students' state of well being in general and how they cope psychologically. For that element it would be hard to replace classroom teaching with virtual teaching. A combination of both would probably work well.

In real life teaching there is more back-up when something fails. For example when the PowerPoint system fails the teacher can hand out photocopies. Some people seem very attached to the traditional classroom and they see no obstacles to what one can do there. All that is needed is a group of people, and that then becomes more important than a blackboard or a piece of chalk. It is not the classroom that can hinder innovation but the attitude of a teacher. The use of a language lab in particular means that a classroom is always connected to the outside world. What becomes possible and of huge value is the fact that one can make the link between what takes place in school with what can happen outside, and then learning does not stop at the school gate. This is the reason why technology has such a potential, it simply needs to be exploited more effectively. The challenge is to learn and understand how to exploit it effectively so that it has meaning for the students.

## **Disadvantages of teaching traditionally in real life**

Having your classroom as your only learning environment is a temporal and spatial constraint. Teachers don't normally go to different places outside their classroom on a regular basis. Websites can be visited but that is obviously not the same as visiting a virtual landmark. Even the typical virtual classrooms outside of SL all look the same: they have a chat window, a whiteboard, and one can maybe see the teacher or the student on a video, but it does not classify as a real experience as it does in SL due to its lack of immersion.

## **Advantages of teaching in SL**

### **Cost**

Compared to a lot of videoconferencing systems, SL is available free of charge. Videoconferencing systems normally need to be purchased, but often institutions struggle financially and therefore it's a great incentive if a system is available for free.

### **Performance anxiety**

An avatar's anonymity (although this is optional) and the inherent fact that one can hide behind an avatar can be beneficial to some students. Asian students in particular suffer from performance anxiety in real life. Culturally it is not acceptable to them to make mistakes and they don't like to embarrass themselves in public so they don't speak up. Performance anxiety is greatly reduced in SL and several interviewees have remarked that Asian students are seen to be much more open and uninhibited when practising a foreign language in SL.

### **Identification**

Also people tend to make a connection to their avatar. Once they have learned how to move around people mostly find it exciting to be in that virtual world, and they have a real sense of embodiment while walking or flying. As SL is a synchronous environment it offers immediacy and it gives a resemblance of reality. The students can experience a sense of the physical space. They can also play with notions of identity and with the representation of self as well as the representation of others. It was mentioned that within minutes of a language class starting the students address themselves by their avatar names and not their real names. That seems to have a psychological effect in that they don't mind making mistakes because it's not them making mistakes, it's their avatar.

### **Text chat**

Formal lectures can be replicated in SL, and the text chat becomes the blackboard. Text chat is very useful in that it can be saved and sent to the students at the end of the lesson. This is comparable to a handout in real life, and the teacher needs to make sure that all the important language and key terms discussed in the lesson appears in text chat as well. Of course as a teacher this means that one needs to be able to speak and use text chat at the same time. However, the students can find this very difficult (see the paragraph on disadvantages of teaching in SL).

### **Teaching environment**

The fact that one can easily replicate communicative formats of real life -- such as lecture theatres and classrooms -- can be an advantage as it gives people something they can identify with easily. It creates a comfort zone and a useful point of reference in an alien world. However, teachers can also go beyond the traditional class setup and teach lessons that are more motivating for the students than simply working with photocopies. Quests, treasure hunts and field trips seem to be very high on the list of favourite tasks. They are more memorable and pleasurable than meeting in virtual 2D classrooms. It has been pointed out that activities in SL take a lot longer than in real life. Therefore the teacher does not have to plan as many activities or tasks, and there are even tasks where the teacher does not have to do much planning at all. The researcher would like to leave open whether this is seen as an advantage or a disadvantage.

### **Distance learning**

SL is seen as very good environment to enhance distance learning. Students don't have to be physically present in the same real life location in order to attend a class. It is a very convenient, time-saving as well as money-saving way to teach. As the students can see their avatars on screen, the interaction is seen as positive, naturalistic, and psychologically valuable. Conversations were felt to be much easier than in a face-to-face classroom due to the fact that no judgements instilled by society are deemed to be valid in SL as people are only looking at an avatar that the other person has constructed. It was seen as an advantage that prejudices were not an issue when teaching multinational classes.

One interviewee reported feedback from a distance student who said that the fact that the students can get in touch with a community beyond the course was very valuable. There is a distinct feeling of a community amongst students on SL courses, they often become friends and meet outside of class.

### **Virtual language travel**

Another interviewee described SL as a component of a virtual language travel package. A typical real life traditional language travel package implies that one goes to a particular country where the accommodation is in a home-stay situation associated with a language school so that there are language lessons in the morning and field trips in the afternoon. This can be replicated with the help of virtual classrooms and SL in that the lessons take place in the virtual classroom (similar to face-to-face teaching as it involves a whiteboard, text readings, grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation) and then SL can be used as the immersive environment for the equivalent of field trips. The real potential of SL is seen in taking the students to meet other nationalities in their natural surroundings which makes it a complete language learning experience. The social aspect of SL can't be rated highly enough.

### **Teachers' attitudes**

Teachers' attitudes can create advantages or disadvantages for them in SL. The environment takes away a certain amount of control, and it will be difficult for teachers who always want to stay in total control to adjust to this. If a teacher is happy with lack of control then SL can be a very satisfactory teaching environment. The teachers' own beliefs about teaching and learning informed their response to different approaches to teaching. Hamilton (2006) confirmed that teachers who were very open minded and very comfortable with things going wrong were completely

happy to trial and to test new technology whereas teachers who were much more fearful of losing control were very reserved and more cautious about using technology. If somebody likes technology and also doesn't mind making mistakes then that person should try teaching in SL.

## **Disadvantages of teaching in SL**

### **Multitasking**

Some students who have very little technical knowledge could easily find their SL experience threatening. For example moving a mouse and speaking a foreign language at the same time could for some people seem like a formidable amount of multitasking. Interviewees reported that students can find it difficult to speak in a foreign language and to concentrate on text chat at the same time. Some of the students cannot cope with the stimulus from speaking and writing at the same time. It represents a huge degree of multitasking and information overload for them (one interviewee speculated that he had such a large proportion of female students because the men could not cope; men are not used to multitasking, they're not used to sharing ideas and building informal networks). Some students who are very proficient in this kind of environment might take over the text chat. If this happens while there is a group of students this can be very distracting. Therefore there need to be clear rules on what the text chat is being used for.

### **Induction**

It can take a long time for students to become proficient in SL, i.e. to learn how to move their avatar and follow basic instructions. If SL is not introduced to the students in the right way (the right way being defined as teachers preparing an induction in order to introduce students to SL and to the way they should act in this virtual world) it can be a very frustrating way to teach. Although students might be familiar with playing video games etc. that doesn't mean that they can cope with an environment like SL.

Students new to SL tend to get very disoriented and they find this virtual environment very strange and weird and ideally they need a one-to-one contact with somebody to help them out. This, again, is comparable to Fresher's week at a university where the student union allocates somebody to look after you and show you around.

### **Technical knowledge**

Technical knowledge and skills have to be taken into consideration when planning a lesson. A particular aspect of a task might appear very straightforward to the teacher but it might take the students most of the hour of the class to understand the basics underlying this task. The teacher might reach a point where he/she has to make a decision on whether they want their students to struggle technically or whether they want them to focus on the language. The technology has been described as being unreliable at the moment. It can not be relied upon as the only means of teaching and should be seen as a support activity. Hopefully the technology will be more robust in the future.

### **Body language**

Limited body language has been referred to earlier as a barrier to teaching in SL. Some students have been reported in saying that they feel totally restricted in the SL environment because they can't use their hands for gestures. When one becomes

proficient in SL there are other ways to compensate for that (such as creating gestures), but to do that one needs to have the technical knowledge that can only be acquired over time.

One interviewee mentioned studies in police interrogation techniques where the body language of the person being interrogated is carefully monitored and by doing so one can gather meaning and context about what they are saying. This is very common in everyday real life but most people are unaware of it. In SL that context is completely absent so there is a need for the teacher to provide a lot of additional support by saying things like “aha”, “I see”, “yes”, which one probably would not do to the same extent in a real life classroom situation because one would simply just nod the head and look at the student. There is a definite need for specific linguistic cues in SL because of the lack of face-to-face contact. There is also an indication that, as students become familiar with SL, they don’t need that kind of support towards the end of the course. At that point they are quite comfortable with a three minute silence while people move around with their avatars and everyone is getting settled. It does take time for people to make that move away from linguistic cues. Also in SL people tend to use their names a lot more when addressing others because otherwise it is difficult to tell who someone is talking to. This is different to videoconferencing systems where it is much clearer who is being addressed due to body language being present.

### **Teachers’ reluctance to introduce new technology**

Even in conventional teaching situations the reluctance of teachers to use multimedia resources and computer based resources is also an issue. Some teachers would therefore be even more reluctant to introduce yet more technology into the classroom. People would have to invest some of their time and this is seen as a very big investment. If teachers feel that they have what they need to run their class properly then they will rarely add anything new to it. In a university context one has to find the right balance for the job as not all teachers are full-time teachers. Some teachers might be mainly researchers and will have different priorities than full-time teachers.

## **Library resources**

There are teachers who don’t use library resources at all for their foreign language teaching purposes. Some teachers don’t use library resources for their SL courses but do use set textbooks and novels for their real life courses. Teacher trainers use a range of books, articles, DVDs and other kinds of material, all of them library resources and these resources are used to prepare student teachers for teaching in both real life and SL. Academic articles seem to be popular for writing the content of academic English sessions in SL, but they are also being used for providing an idea and then an activity is designed around that particular idea. Teachers who do use library resources for their foreign language teaching are heavy users of authentic language resources and online dictionaries and digital material of all sorts. The internet is being used extensively to search for resources, though it is unclear how extensively the library’s electronic resources are being used for this purpose. One interviewee expressed the view that paper as a publishing format is soon going to become obsolete. The consensus seems to be that a lot more library resources are being used for the real life courses compared to the SL courses with the exception of electronic resources (newspapers, databases, e-journals, etc.).

## **Role of the library**

### **Cooperation between the academic library and the Language lab**

One of the interviewees expressed the opinion that for foreign language learning, especially English, the internet has taken the place of the textbook. Several interviewees with experience in teaching in real life and SL see language labs as more relevant to foreign language learning than libraries, as the language labs are usually the places holding the majority of audiovisual material as well as CALL material (Computer-assisted language learning). The suggestion was made that libraries could physically install more computers in order to make more and more information available online. Another take on this is to relocate Language Centres into the academic libraries to ensure that all the relevant material for foreign language learning including language labs are under the same roof and not at a great distance from the Language Faculties. This might make it easier and more conducive for students to follow up links and activities. Libraries could also become a repository of languages (a current JISC project “Languages Open Resources Online (LORO)”<sup>18</sup> is investigating this).

### **Practical help**

Foreign language teachers are asking for more practical material to be included in the library. The existence of material on theories and frameworks was seen as important library stock but in order to improve teaching skills and to help students improve their learning practical guides are being asked for.

One interviewee expressed the need for videos and other material that is well classified to save time in the search and retrieval process. It is useful to know where to look for material that is going to be of interest and it can take time to actually identify an item of use. The more help that can be offered the better.

### **Outreach**

The library in general is seen to have an outreach problem in that it is seen as a challenge to reach those teachers and learners who do not visit the library and who do not make use of the library’s resources. The point here is not so much about the availability of the library’s resources but about a psychological and/or cultural shift to make these teachers/learners see the value of the library. The teachers who are interested in technology and who are familiar with database search techniques will find the resources and this will make an impact on how teachers exploit technology with their students and on teachers directing students to their resources. The difficulty is with students and teachers who are reluctant to explore these possibilities.

### **Information literacy**

The library is more than a collection of books, it is also a centre for research activity, and ideally there should be close cooperation between the foreign language learning staff and the librarians. Essentially the role of the library is to provide support to the

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<sup>18</sup> <http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/inf111/loro.aspx>



teacher, and this can be achieved by keeping the resources up to date. Academic libraries, however, are not seen as being particularly accessible. Interviewees have expressed the need for library catalogues and search facilities to be more intuitive (Amazon was given as an example with their “do you mean ...” option). Training students in information literacy is another vital suggestion. Those same interviewees argued that students turn to Google as their first port of call far too often and that they have no idea about the quality of the information they receive or how to filter it well. Improved information literacy as well as more user-friendly interfaces would make libraries more accessible and the libraries would benefit from increased usage. This is not a SL-specific point but as some library catalogues are accessible through SL this is worth mentioning for both worlds.

## **Impact on resource provision**

Ideally books/references could be accessed from within SL and that could be a big link with libraries. Certain library services could be made available in SL. Access could be restricted to university members if deemed necessary. There is no reason not to have access to specific library-funded resources within SL. While sitting on an island you could quite easily have access to a course library and a reference list that links directly to journal articles with the usual kind of restriction regarding copyright etc. This would be a very useful tool indeed. The same could be done with videos. Picture libraries, multimedia material, objects, ready to use props and ready to use (SL) environments for teaching languages are on the interviewees’ wishlist to be made available more easily. Foreign language learning material and related links could be integrated into a virtual space. A tool like SL is exciting and it can capture people’s imagination in ways that 2D tools can’t do as easily.

One interviewee thought that, if SL was always available for foreign language learning, maybe the library won’t be needed any longer in this area unless specific material is being produced to go with it. There is also the option of creating a library environment in SL that is very physical, dynamic, and body-intuitive. If that physicality from the 3D space can be translated into how it links with academic libraries then that would be seen as very beneficial.

There might well be an impact for the library’s resource provision in that additional material might be purchased or created, but it is a mistake to consider that the traditional classroom environment will change forever simply because SL has appeared on the horizon. The advent of online shopping has not deterred people from going shopping in their local high street. It is simply an additional option available to people.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear to see from the findings that language teaching in SL is still at an experimental stage with plenty of potential for total immersion and distance learning programmes. Tierney and Dilley (2002, p.464) state that “[...]no change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be as significant or as wide-ranging as distance learning” and if this is true then SL, in one form or another, will have a very important part to play in

educational programmes. Libraries will need to ensure that access to electronic resources is wide-spread to include students who are not based on campus.

Technical barriers have been mentioned many times. This issue paired with the fact that SL would be an ideal tool for distance learners, many of whom might live in less developed countries, raises concern about the increase of the “digital divide”. It is important to remember that SL is seen as an inclusive and not an exclusive tool.

A virtual classroom in SL sets itself apart from other virtual classrooms in that an ordinary classroom is the place to learn a language whereas the SL virtual classroom is the place to practice a language. The connection to the outside world from a language lab is a 2D connection, but increasingly people enjoy rich and dynamic 3D environments such as SL as can be concluded from the high number of UK universities active in SL.

There are many virtual worlds in existence. A number of them have been designed for children, but Second Life enjoys the biggest publicity plus a fairly low entry level which makes it interesting as an educational tool.

As can be seen from this report there are a number of distinct hurdles and disadvantages to overcome. The traditional classroom is generally still seen as an effectively functioning place for foreign language learning/teaching, but teachers do move their courses or elements of their courses into SL in order to exploit the virtual world’s rich environment. However, SL classrooms are not viewed as a replacement for real life classrooms. SL classrooms are an additional tool to be used by the teacher/learner.

The choice of teaching resources is not completely different in real life and SL. In SL there is less reliance on textbooks and much more emphasis on electronic material and objects. It is not entirely clear where the online material is being sourced from and whether teachers and students can properly identify online material that has been purchased by their library. The branding of libraries’ online resources is a well known issue in the library community. Academic libraries and in particular language labs are seen as being well equipped with foreign language learning material, but there is a need for these to be housed closely together if not even in the same building to make it easier for students to follow up activities. However, there appears to be very little printed material for virtual courses. Publishers have not sufficiently taken the opportunity to publish material for computer based learning environments.

Librarians have discovered SL as both a marketing as well as an educational tool. Libraries have always tried to be innovative and to position themselves in the front row when new technologies become mainstream. In SL many libraries (academic and public) have created a presence from which library services are provided to SL residents. Virtual reference desks are being staffed in SL, and help is at hand for both real life as well as SL enquiries in many languages. Librarians attend virtual meetings and discussion groups in SL which is of great benefit to their professional relationships. They can gain relevant knowledge to keep up with developments and widen their horizon. It can be empowerment for librarians.

Teachers in particular express the wish for books/references to be accessed from within SL. In terms of printed material there does not seem to be much impact on the

resource provision in academic libraries apart from continuing to stock relevant research and teaching material. However, a widening of electronic resources including specific objects and ready to use props for SL have been mentioned by several interviewees. It is of course important to bear in mind that it is still early days for teaching activities in SL and that, as teaching practice increases there, the need for teaching material becomes much clearer. SL in itself has so many resources to offer that one possible scenario could be for the library to enhance its role as a centre for research when following up activities in SL.

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## **APPENDIX**

### **About the interviewee**

Are you a teacher or a student of foreign languages? – This includes ESL or EFL courses, any language which is different from your mother tongue.

Which language are you teaching/learning?

What level are you at? – Beginner, intermediate, advanced. [for students]

Which institution are you employed at?

Are you a regular user of an academic library for your language teaching/learning purposes?

Are you familiar with Second Life (SL)?

### **Type of course/class**

Are you teaching/learning in the traditional style\* or in SL?

If either – would you consider the other?

If both – why both?

Would it be possible for me to observe one of your SL classes?

What kind of course do you run? - Is it project-based/discussion etc.

Is your course voluntary or compulsory?

How big is the class?

How long is the course (hours/weeks)?

How long is a class?

Do classes take place during the day or in the evenings?

What level is the course at? – Beginner, intermediate, advanced.

Who is the class aimed at?

### **Teaching/learning in the traditional style**

What are the main components of your course in terms of teaching resources?

If there is an online component of your course, how big is it? –  $\frac{1}{4}$ ,  $\frac{1}{2}$ ,  $\frac{3}{4}$ .

What kind of material is available online as part of your course?

Is the course embedded into a VLE?

Is there a sense of community among the students?

How important do you consider networking? – In the sense of creating connection to other teachers/students.

What are the pre-requisites for taking this course?

Where is your teaching location? – In real life.

Have you come across any hurdles/barriers when teaching foreign languages?

If yes – which ones?

Are Library resources used in your course?

Do you support your course with blogs, wikis, etc.?

Do you see advantages in teaching/learning in the traditional style as opposed to SL?

If so – which ones?

Do you see disadvantages in teaching/learning in the traditional style as opposed to SL?

If so – which ones?

How high is your completion rate? – Measured by the people who start and finish the course.

### **Teaching/learning in Second Life**

What are the main components of your course in terms of teaching resources?

Is your course embedded into a VLE?

Is there a sense of community among the students?

How important do you consider networking? – In the sense of creating connections to other teachers/students.

What are the pre-requisites for taking this course?

Where is your teaching location in SL?

Have you come across any hurdles/barriers when teaching in SL?

If yes – which ones?

Are Library resources used in your SL course?

What kind of teaching resources are you using in SL?

What does SL have to offer that can't be achieved with tools in an online environment?

Do you support your course with blogs, wikis, etc.?

Do you see advantages in teaching/learning in SL as opposed to the traditional style?

If so – which ones?

Do you see disadvantages in teaching/learning in SL as opposed to the traditional style?

If so – which ones?

How high is your completion rate? – Measured by the people who start and finish the course.

### **Role of the Library**

Are you aware of foreign language learning material in your academic library?

Do you use an academic library for your language teaching/learning needs?

How do you see the role of the academic library in foreign language learning?

Is there anything you feel that the academic library could do to improve foreign language learning?

Do you think foreign language learning in SL will have an impact on the resource provision in academic libraries? – For example, SL loaded onto library PCs or SL course material.

If so – what kind of impact?

\* By traditional style I mean the conventional classroom set-up with the teacher at the front and the students at the other end, it can also include lab work or other online environments which are not taking place in SL.